PROTESTANT HOUR

SERMON #1 - SUMMARY

CONTENDING WITH GOD

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHICAGO

Scripture

Job 21:2, 3a, 7, 15, 16, 23:2-4

Need this

"Why do the wicked live on ...? Today ... my complaint is bitter: ..." --Job 21:7, 23:2 (NRSV)

This sermon uses the story of Job to address contemporary faith issues. What is the faith response to the questions - why do the innocent suffer and, what do I do with the anger I feel sometimes when life is not fair?

The magnificent story of Job promises us that negative emotions, contending with God, arguing with God, are not failures of faith. Arguing with God is a way of taking God seriously, believing in God.

The response to Job's questions, and ours, about life's unfairness and the anomaly of innocent suffering, is not an academic answer, but a man whose dying on a cross expressed God's love for us and presence with us in the midst of suffering.

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SCRIPTURE

JOB 21:2, 3A, 7, 15, 16, 23:2-4

"WHY DO THE WICKED LIVE ON ...?

TODAY ... MY COMPLAINT IS BITTER: ..."

JOB 21:7, 23:2 (NRSV)

Job 21:7
Why do the wicked live on, reach old age & grow mighty in power?
to
23:2-4

HAVE YOU EVER ARGUED WITH GOD? HAVE YOUR PRAYERS EVER HAD A SHARP EDGE, A LITTLE STING TO THEM? HAVE YOU TALKED BACK TO GOD, DEMANDED THAT GOD PAY ATTENTION? HAVE YOU EVER BEEN ANGRY WITH GOD? IN ONE SENSE THOSE SOUND LIKE VERY PRESUMPTUOUS, ARROGANT SUGGESTIONS. MY FIRST AND QUICK RESPONSE, IF THE PREACHER ASKED ME THAT SEQUENCE OF QUESTIONS, WOULD BE TO STIFFEN A BIT AND BECOME DEFENSIVE AND DENY ALL. ARGUE

WITH GOD? ANGRY WITH GOD? OF COURSE NOT! THAT'S RIDICULOUS.

AND YET, IF YOU CAN ANSWER AFFIRMATIVELY: "YES, THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I ARGUED WITH GOD, OR VERY MUCH WANTED TO, AND YES, I WAS ANGRY WITH GOD," YOU ARE IN GOOD COMPANY. IN FACT, MY SUGGESTION IS THAT EVEN THOUGH WE MAY HAVE TROUBLE ACKNOWLEDGING IT, EVEN TO OURSELVES, MANY OF US HAVE CONTENDED WITH GOD, MAY INDEED BE ENGAGED IN AN ANGRY CONTENTION WITH GOD AT THIS VERY MOMENT.

JOB GOT ANGRY AND ARGUED WITH GOD. DO YOU KNOW THE STORY OF JOB? IT IS ABOUT ISSUES AS RELEVANT AS THIS MORNING'S NEWSPAPERS AND QUESTIONS YOU AND I ASK EVERY DAY.

JOB IS A GOOD MAN. HE IS COMFORTABLE, SECURE, OWNS A BIG ESTATE AND A LOT OF LIVESTOCK. HE LOVES HIS WIFE AND TOGETHER THEY, IN MIDDLE AGE, ARE ENJOY-

ING THEIR TEN WONDERFUL CHILDREN WHO THEMSELVES ENJOY BEING JOB'S FAMILY AND EAT AND DRINK IN ONE ANOTHER'S HOMES REGULARLY. IT IS A PICTURE OF PERFECT HAPPINESS. IN A CULTURE WHICH WAS ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN THAT GOD BLESSES THE RIGHTEOUS WITH WEALTH AND BIG HEALTHY FAMILIES AND PUNISHES THE WICKED, JOB IS A SYMBOL OF ALL THAT IS GOOD. BEST OF ALL, HE IS APPROPRIATELY GRATEFUL AND FAITHFUL IN HIS RELIGIOUS RESPONSIBILITIES. THIS MAN IS SO GOOD HE EVEN DOES EXTRA RELIGIOUS DUTY, PUTS A LITTLE EXTRA IN THE PLATE, FOR HIS CHILDREN WHO HAVE NOT QUITE ARRIVED AT THE AGE OF MATURE RELIGIOUS RESPONSIBILITY BUT SOON WILL, HE HOPES AND PRAYS. THIS IS A GOOD AND GREAT MAN.

IN THE MEANTIME GOD AND SATAN ARE DISCUSSING THE PECULIAR PHENOMENON OF HUMAN FAITHFULNESS, THE APPARENT HUMAN

CAPACITY TO BELIEVE IN GOD; PERHAPS EVEN THE YEARNING TO BELIEVE, THE NEED TO TRUST . . .

"CONSIDER JOB, A GOOD AND FAITHFUL MAN," GOD SAYS WITH CONSIDERABLE PRIDE.

"BIG DEAL," SATAN REPLIES. "OF COURSE HE'S GOOD AND FAITHFUL. YOU'VE BLESSED HIM WITH ALL THOSE SHEEP AND CATTLE, ALL THOSE FAT HEALTHY BABIES. NO WONDER HE BELIEVES IN GOD. TAKE IT ALL AWAY. MAKE HIM SUFFER. LET'S SEE WHAT HAPPENS THEN."

AND SO IT IS THAT ONE DAY JOB'S PERFECT LIFE DISINTEGRATES.

HIS LIVESTOCK AND EMPLOYEES ARE ALL KILLED. HIS CHILDREN DIE IN A WINDSTORM. ALL IS LOST. "NAKED I CAME FROM MY MOTHER'S WOMB, NAKED SHALL I RETURN. THE LORD GAVE. THE LORD HAS TAKEN AWAY. BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD."

JOB BREAKS OUT IN OFFENSIVE SORES, A ONCE PROUD AND COMFORTABLE AND GOOD MAN, SITS ON A HEAP OF ASHES, SCRATCHING HIS SORES WITH A PIECE OF BROKEN POTTERY. FINALLY HIS FAITHFUL WIFE TURNS ON HIM: "DO YOU STILL PERSIST IN YOUR INTEGRITY? CURSE GOD AND DIE!"

IT IS A STORY OF A MAN WHO WANTS TO BELIEVE IN GOD SO MUCH THAT HE PERSISTS IN THE FACE OF THE VERY SITUATION WHICH SEEMS TO DENY THE VERY NOTION OF GOD.

AND AT ANOTHER LEVEL, JOB RELENTLESSLY DEALS WITH THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN QUESTION: THE QUESTION OF INNOCENT SUFFERING. WHY DOES IT HAPPEN? MANY THOUGHTFUL AND DEEPLY FAITHFUL PEOPLE HAVE ASKED THE QUESTION, NOT IN THE ABSTRACT, BUT IN THE MIDST OF THEIR OWN DESPERATE PAIN.

A YALE PROFESSOR Nicholas Wolterstorff WROTE ABOUT HIS RESPONSE TO THE DEATH OF A SON IN A

MOUNTAIN CLIMBING ACCIDENT:

"I CANNOT FIT IT ALL TOGETHER ... TO THE MOST AGONIZED QUESTION I EVER ASKED I DO NOT KNOW THE ANSWER. I DO NOT KNOW WHY GOD WOULD WATCH HIM FALL. I DO NOT KNOW WHY GOD WOULD WATCH ME WOUNDED. I CANNOT EVEN GUESS ... I CAN ONLY, WITH JOB, ENDURE." [LAMENT FOR A SON, P. 67/68]

IT IS AND HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN QUESTION -- WHY DO THE INNOCENT SUFFER?

ROBERT MCAFEE BROWN IS ONE OF OUR distinguished Presby scholar MOST DISTINGUISHED THEOLOGIANS. RECENTLY HIS NEWBORN GRANDDAUGHTER WAS FIGHTING FOR HER LIFE IN THE HOSPITAL WITH A CRITICAL KIDNEY DISEASE. BROWN WROTE HER A BEAUTIFUL LETTER WHICH THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY SUBSEQUENTLY PUBLISHED:

"DEAR MACKENZIE" HE WROTE, "IN YOUR YOUNG LIFE YOU HAVE ALREADY ACCOMPLISHED

A LOT. YOU HAVE WIDENED THE CIRCLE OF LOVE. THERE ARE THINGS WE WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND, BUT WITHIN WHICH WE LIVE. HERE IS ONE: WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOU IS BAD, AND YET GOOD HAS COME OF IT. INSTEAD OF MAKING US BITTER, SUFFERING CAN MAKE US TENDER, AND HELP US TO FOCUS ON OTHERS WHO ARE GOING THROUGH COMPARABLE EXPERIENCES."

THE CRITICALLY ILL BABY WAS A REMINDER, BROWN REFLECTS, THAT TIME IS SO VERY PRECIOUS. "I HOPE THAT WE WILL NEVER FORGET WHAT WE LEARNED IN THE PEDIATRIC WARD: THE SHEER WONDER OF A SINGLE DAY IN WHICH YOU, MACKENZIE, AND THOSE WE LOVE, AND OTHERS ELSEWHERE, ARE DOING NOTHING MORE SPECTACULAR THAN BREATHING REGULARLY."

I RECENTLY HEARD A REMARKABLE SPEECH SUPREME COURT JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR MADE TO A GROUP OF WOMEN --

SURVIVORS OF CANCER. JUSTICE O'CONNOR WAS CANDID, STRAIGHT FORWARD, BUSINESS-LIKE, AND ELOQUENT AS SHE SHARED HER OWN EXPERIENCE; THE FEAR, THE TECHNICAL COMPLEXITY, THE FRUSTRATION AT HAVING TO DEAL WITH SIX DIFFERENT DOCTORS, EACH SAYING SOMETHING DIFFERENT, ... AND THE VULNERABILITY AND POWERLESSNESS. AT THE END AS SHE WAS TALKING ABOUT WHAT SHE LEARNED, SHE ECHOED BOB BROWN - THE PRE CIOUS GIFT OF EVERY DAY; THE WAY A CLOSE CALL, A REMINDER OF OUR MORTALITY, IS A GIFT BECAUSE IT PUNCTUATES THE GRACE OF LIFE, THE UNDESERVED, UNMERITED, UN-EARNED MIRACLE THAT WE ARE HERE, TODAY, EACH OF US, BREATHING REGULARLY, FUNC-TIONING, ...

PROFESSOR BROWN'S CONCLUSION OF HIS LETTER TO MACKENZIE DEALT WITH THE BASIC ISSUE.

"If you live, I will give God thanks," he wrote. "If you do not I will be asking 'Why does all this happen to a tiny newborn baby?' I know that there is one answer that does not tempt me: the pious statement that 'whatever happens is God's will and we must accept it.' It is not God's will that you or any of God's children should die in infancy. It is God's will that you live joyously and fully."

And then Brown sounds like Job. "If you die" he writes to little MacKenzie, "we will not be acquiescent and meekly accepting." [The Christian Century, 3/2/94, p. 227]

Job is not acquiescent. He does not meekly accept what has happened to him. In fact, he is deeply angry.

Three friends come to visit Job in his misery and try to comfort him. They

SAY THE KINDS OF THINGS WE ARE TEMPTED TO SAY TO ONE ANOTHER IN SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES: "IT WAS GOD'S WILL. YOU HAVE TO ACCEPT THE BAD WITH THE GOOD." JOB'S FRIENDS REPEAT THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM OF THEIR CULTURE. GOD SENDS SUFFERING TO PUNISH WICKEDNESS. JOB NEEDS TO IDENTIFY HIS SIN, CONFESS HIS GUILT AND GOD WILL FORGIVE AND RESTORE.

JOB WILL HAVE NONE OF IT. HE'S INNOCENT AND KNOWS IT. HE HAS DONE NOTHING TO DESERVE WHAT HAS HAPPENED. WHAT HAS TRANSPIRED CANNOT BE GOD'S DOING. GOD'S WILL. AND HE STARTS TO GET ANGRY ... ANGRY WITH HIS FRIENDS FOR TRIVIALIZING HIS SUFFERING, ANGRY AT THE UNFAIRNESS OF IT ALL, AND FINALLY, ANGRY WITH GOD.

NORMAN HABEL, AN AUSTRALIAN SCHOLAR, RECALLS THE DAY HIS HOME BURNED TO THE GROUND.

"It was the day before Christmas and in the dry heat of the Australian summer the wooden farmhouse was consumed like tinder. As we watched the blaze people came from everywhere. A pastor, too came. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Norm, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away.' I was angry. I wanted to hit him. There was no comfort in his words at that moment." [Job, p. 42]

Job becomes angry. The 21st chapter, from which we heard several verses, is a lengthy, angry, explosion on the topic of life's unfairness. Conventional wisdom is wrong. Good people are not rewarded and bad people punished. Sometimes the opposite happens. The wicked prosper.

"Life isn't fair" Job complains bitterly, finally finding the courage to

BRING HIS CASE TO GOD ...

"OH, THAT I KNEW WHERE I MIGHT FIND HIM, ... I WOULD LAY MY CASE BEFORE HIM, AND ARGUE.

THAT'S A BIT MUCH FOR MOST OF US. WHATEVER OUR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, ANGRY COMPLAINING AND DEMANDING IS ORDINARILY NOT A PART OF IT. IN FACT, RELIGION SEEMS TO TEACH THAT SUBMISSION TO GOD'S WILL, OR SUBMISSION TO WHATEVER HAPPENS TO US, IS THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE.

JOB IS NOT MEEKLY SUBMISSIVE, IN FACT JOB TAKES GOD SO SERIOUSLY, TRUSTS GOD SO TOTALLY, THAT HE MUST BRING TO GOD EVEN THIS ONSLAUGHT OF RESENTMENT AND GRIEF AND ANGER. WE ARE LISTENING IN ON THE FAITHFUL PRAYERS OF A PROFOUNDLY FAITHFUL MAN, AND THEY ARE SO STRONG AND SO HONEST THAT THEY MAKE US UNCOMFORTABLE.

ANGER, WE [redacted], IS ALWAYS A PART OF THE EXPERIENCE OF LOSS. AT THE TIME OF DEEP PERSONAL LOSS EVEN THE MOST DEVOUT PERSON CAN FEEL HOSTILE AND RESENTFUL .. WHEN WE LOSE SOMEONE WE LOOK FOR SOMEONE TO BLAME ... OFTENTIMES THE DOCTOR FOR OPERATING OR NOT OPERATING, FOR ARRIVING TOO LATE OR FOR MAKING THE WRONG DIAGNOSIS, OR FOR NOT CARING ENOUGH. NO MATTER WHAT HE OR SHE DID IT WAS WRONG. SOMETIMES WE GET ANGRY AT THE MINISTER OR THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR, OR ONE ANOTHER, OR OURSELVES. "IT'S ALL MY FAULT, I SHOULD HAVE DONE THIS OR THAT." AND OFTEN TIMES, BENEATH IT ALL, AT A LEVEL SO DEEP IN US WE CANNOT ALWAYS LOCATE IT, WE ARE ANGRY AT LIFE, ITS UNFAIRNESS, AND AT GOD. "OH GOD, WHY HAVE YOU DONE THIS TO ME? WHERE ARE YOU WHEN I NEED YOU? ANSWER ME!"

You know

WE KNOW THAT IN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IT IS BETTER TO EXPRESS OUR ANGER THAN TO REPRESS IT, OR TO AIM IT TOWARD SOMEONE OR SOMETHING ELSE, OR TURN IT ON OURSELVES, OR SIMPLY SULK IN SILENCE. UNEXPRESSED ANGER CAN BECOME A VERY REAL BARRIER BETWEEN US, SO WE MUST LEARN THAT TRUST AND FAITH IN GOD WHO LOVES US AND CARES ABOUT US ALLOWS AND INVITES US TO GIVE VOICE TO THAT DEEP SENSE OF PAIN AND ANGER.

THIS MAGNIFICENT STORY ASSURES/PROMISES THAT NEGATIVE EMOTIONS, CONTENDING WITH GOD, ARGUING WITH GOD, ARE NOT FAILURES OF FAITH. ARGUING WITH GOD IS A WAY OF BELIEVING IN GOD, TAKING GOD SERIOUSLY, TRUSTING IN GOD.

IN ARCHIBALD MACLEISH'S PLAY, JB, - WHICH IS A RETELLING OF THE STORY OF JOB IN A CONTEMPORARY SETTING - JB SAYS,

"God is there too, in the desperation. I do not know why God should strike. But God is what is stricken also." [p. 89]

On that day, a dark Friday afternoon, when all was lost, the process of execution began, his friends gone, his people either weeping or jeering, his life ebbing painfully, Jesus gathered his strength and cried. It was not, I think, meek and submissive. It was at once the most human and the holiest of prayers:

("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.")

When I'm that hurt and vulnerable, when life is that unfair and when I cannot repress or deny my anger any longer, I do not want an academic answer to the question of innocent suffering. I do not want an answer at all. I want

SOMEONE TO HEAR ME, MY PRAYER, MY PAIN, MY ANGER.

THAT'S WHAT THAT MAN ON THE CROSS IS ABOUT. HE IS GOD'S ANSWER. HE IS GOD'S PRESENCE.

HE IS THE BLESSED PROMISE WHICH JOB DESPERATELY WANTED AND FINALLY HEARD ... THERE IS A GOD OF LOVE, WHO HAS COME TO BE WITH US; NOT SO MUCH TO PROVIDE ANSWERS, BUT TO PARTICIPATE IN LIFE WITH US, TO BE WITH US THROUGH ALL THOSE EXPERIENCES WHICH PRECIPITATE OUR QUESTIONS: A GOD, NOT REMOTE, BUT CLOSE; NOT DETACHED, BUT A GOD WHO SHARES HUMAN SUFFERING AND WHOSE LOVE ALWAYS WELCOMES US AS WE ARE - TIRED, FRIGHTENED, LONELY, ANGRY.

* * * * *

O GOD, WE COME BEFORE YOU HUMBLY, BRINGING WHAT FAITH WE HAVE: AND ALSO

BRINGING OUR DOUBT, OUR FEAR, OUR RESENTMENT, OUR ANGER. THANK YOU FOR HEARING US; FOR BEING OUR GOD; FOR LIGHT IN OUR DARKNESS. THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.